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Book Review: The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era

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The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era. By Tom Holm. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. xx + 244 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

The notion that the federal government's relationship with Native American nations has been chronically "confused" is one of the most familiar truisms in American history. Countless commentators have chronicled the ebb and flow of federal Indian policy among the wildly disparate goals of extinguishment, displacement, assimilation, and self-determination. Given the widespread acceptance of that fundamental premise, Tom Holm's *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs* may at first glance appear to offer only superfluous support for an already obvious point. Fortunately, however, Holm's work offers a good deal more than mere reiteration, providing subtly significant new insights into the nuances of the federal government's never-ending attempts to deal effectively with what was often perceived to be its "Indian problem."

Holm seeks to make two fundamental points. First, he contends that the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century represents a

particularly "confused" period in the history of federal-Indian policy. Secondly, and more significantly, he argues that the Progressive period marks a uniquely and profoundly significant *transitional* period in the long and convoluted history of federal-Indian relations—one that was so unsuccessful and so unsatisfying to all interested parties that it ultimately led to the emergence of a "new paradigm" and a new "reform" impetus championed most prominently by John Collier in the late 1920s and '30s.

Borrowing his theoretical framework from a 1983 Canadian task force report entitled "The Government of Aboriginal Peoples," Holm argues that federal Indian policy during the first two decades of the twentieth century evolved into a hopelessly muddled mishmash of dichotomous dynamics that bridged the "assimilationist" policies of the late nineteenth century (the illusory "vanishing" policy that suggested that Indians would be gradually absorbed by and merged into mainstream American society) and the "structural accommodation" stage represented by Collier and the Indian New Deal of the 1930s. By refusing to "vanish" and maintaining their sense of "peopleness," Holm contends, Native Americans ultimately forced government decision makers to reassess their attitudes, positions, and goals. In the short-term, the assimilationist policy collapsed. In the long-term, Indian resiliency pushed the government in the direction of the current policy stage of "self-determination" and "limited sovereignty" for Native American nations. While those concepts are, of course, filled with ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions of their own, they represent a relatively beneficial byproduct of a uniquely troubling period in Indian history. Holm's work serves as a useful and instructive reminder of that fundamental fact and deserves an appreciative audience among both generalists and specialists in the field.

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